

CIRCULAR

ADDRESSED TO THE SEVERAL LODGES

OF

FREE & ACCEPTED MASONS

IN THE

STATE OF NEW YORK,

BY

THE COMMITTEE APPOINTED

AT GENEVA,

AUGUST 9, A. L., 5848.

WITH AN APPENDIX.

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The Committee appointed at Geneva, have already sent the following Circular in a letter form to the Master and Secretary of each Lodge in the State; believing that in that way it would come properly and sufficiently before the several Lodges. At a meeting of certain Masters and Past Masters held at the Howard House in the city of New York, Oct. 31, A. L. 5848, a series of Resolutions were adopted by those Masters and Past Masters, condemning the proposed amendments, and appointing an "Executive Committee" with directions to address a circular letter to "every Lodge, Officer, AND KNOWN MEMBER of all the Lodges in the State." It has therefore been thought advisable to reprint this Circular, in a form more convenient than the first for general circulation among the Fraternity.

The unexpected and dangerous grounds upon which opposition to the amendments is chiefly based, have given greatly increased importance to the whole subject; and after those grounds shall have been more fully developed by the Circular letter of New York Past Masters (which has been so long promised) the Geneva Committee may perhaps deem it advisable again to address their brethren.

Dec. A. L. 5848.

*To the Worshipful Master, Wardens and Brethren
of
Lodge, No.*

At the dedication, in Geneva, on the 9th of August, of the new and beautiful Masonic Hall, a very large number of the Fraternity, from various Lodges, were assembled. Being thus together, they availed themselves of the opportunity of advising with each other on the subject of the proposed amendments to the written Masonic Constitution of the State, relating to Past Masters. An informal meeting was held, and a resolution unanimously adopted approving of those amendments, and commending them to the favorable action of the Lodges; and it was also voted that a committee be appointed to issue a Circular, on the subject, to the various Lodges of the State.

It is at the request and by the authority of that meeting that we now address you.

The amendment above referred to, received the affirmative vote of the Grand Lodge, at the last June communication. It is now submitted to the whole Fraternity; and the subject should receive, from all the Lodges, a calm and careful consideration and such action as, in their opinion, will be most consistent with right and justice, and will most advance the interests of our beloved order.

It is well known that, by the present Constitution, any person, whom any single Lodge in the State has thought proper to elect its Master for a year, and who has served his year in that office, becomes thereby a permanent member of the Grand Lodge, and, as such, a ruler for life over the whole Fraternity of the State. Nor, under the present Constitution, is this, his right to govern, changed or diminished by lapse of time or any other cause, provided he remains a member of any subordinate Lodge. He is, too, an independent as well as a permanent member of the Grand Lodge; he is not the representative of any Lodge; he cannot be instructed by any Lodge; he is not bound to consult the wishes of any portion of the Fraternity; but, in every exercise of his high powers, he is governed solely by his own caprice or his own sense of duty. The amendment under consideration proposes to change somewhat the organization of the Grand Lodge in reference to Past Masters. It proposes that, so far as membership in the Grand Lodge is an honor and a compliment, the Constitution shall remain as it now is. It proposes that Past Masters shall be honorary members for life of the Grand Lodge, and, as such, be entitled to be present at its meetings, and to participate in its deliberations—but it proposes to diminish materially their right of voting, as such, in the Grand Lodge; and to confine that right to the Past Master of each subordinate Lodge, who has last passed the chair thereof.

While the Masonic Constitution of the State has remained as it is, it has been right that every Past Master, who chose, should exercise, to the fullest extent, the privilege which the Constitution has conferred. No censure, certainly, can justly attach to him for so doing; but it is a privilege we believe which few comparatively covet, and which very many Past Masters have never once exercised, and it is to be presumed that if there are reasons for a change affecting the whole Fraternity, all will desire that such change take place.

We shall state, very briefly, a few of the considerations which have influenced our minds in considering the question of the expediency of the amendment proposed; but it may not be inappropriate to inquire, first, what was the ANCIENT USAGE of the Fraternity in this respect? According to ancient usage, were Past Masters members of the Grand Lodge? Or, on the other hand, is the regulation constituting them members a modern innovation?

Our own Masonic existence is derived from the Grand Lodge of England. It is believed that the oldest printed book of Masonic Constitutions, in any language, is that published in 1723, under the sanction of the Grand Lodge of England;—for, previous to that time, a certain degree of secrecy, as regards the world at large, was observed even in reference to “things proper to be written,” and they were preserved only in the written records of the Fraternity. A copy of this old and valuable Book belongs to the library of the Grand Lodge of this State.

It would appear from this Book, as well as other authorities, that there had been previously, in England, two formal revisions of the Masonic Constitutions; “first in the reign of King Athelstane, the Saxon, and long after in the reign of King Henry, IV., the Norman.” This Book of Constitutions (that published in 1723,) was prepared with great care, upon an examination of manuscript copies from Italy, Scotland and England, and other ancient records;—and it recites that the regulations it contains, were conformed to “the ANCIENT RECORDS and IMMEMORIAL USAGE of the Fraternity.” The following article, copied therefrom, shows who composed the Grand Lodge:

“The Grand Lodge consists of and is formed by the Masters and Wardens of all the regular particular Lodges upon record; with the Grand Master at their head, and his Deputy at his left hand, and the Grand Wardens in their proper places.”

That very learned Masonic writer, the Rev. Dr. Anderson, who, as early as 1723, was Master of a Lodge in London, in mentioning the revival of the Grand Lodge of England, in 1717, says, there was revived the quarterly “communication of the officers of Lodges, called the Grand Lodge.”

We are happy to perceive that, in those old Masonic Constitutions, the republican doctrine of representation is distinctly recognized; and we allude to the fact as having a direct bearing upon the subject now before the Lodges of this State for deter-

situation. The following is one of the articles of that earliest printed Masonic Constitution extant, from which we have above quoted, viz.:

"The majority of every particular Lodge, when congregated, shall have the privilege of giving instructions to their Master and Wardens, before the assembling of the Grand Chapter or Lodge, at the three quarterly communications hereinafter mentioned, and of the annual Grand Lodge too; because their Master and Wardens are their representatives, and are supposed to speak their mind."

It will thus be seen that, according to *ancient usage*, the Grand Lodge was composed solely of the Masters and Wardens of Lodges, as the representatives of their respective Lodges, with the Grand Officers at their head. Each Lodge, therefore, by its representatives, had three votes; and there were no other members of the Grand Lodge except the Grand Officers.

Other authorities might be adduced to show that, by *ANCIENT custom*, this was the composition of the Grand Lodge. Such, for instance, is that furnished by a very old copy of the Masonic Constitutions, published under the authority of the Grand Lodge of "the Low Countries," which one of our number has examined; and in which the article defining the Grand Lodge, though written in a different tongue, is precisely the same in sense as that quoted above from the old Constitutions as published in England.

It is not material to inquire when or where the provision was first introduced which now prevails in this State, and some other Masonic jurisdictions, making Past Masters, as such, members of the Grand Lodge. The little attention we have directed to this point inclines us to believe that, like many other innovations, it came upon the Fraternity unawares, and first came quietly in as a matter of "courtesy." However that may be, it is certain that in the Grand Lodge of England it had not been introduced in 1746, nor in 1756, nor in 1767, nor in 1786; as will be seen by reference to the Masonic Constitutions, published in each of those years respectively, under the authority of the Grand Lodge of England; copies of which are in the library of the Grand Lodge of this State. It is certain that Past Masters were not members of the Grand Lodge of England, when the Grand Lodge of New York separated from its mother and became an independent Grand Lodge.

At the present day, the rule is not uniform; it varies in different jurisdictions. In Massachusetts, Past Masters are not members of the Grand Lodge; nor in Connecticut; nor in Ohio; nor in North Carolina. And it is believed that the same rule prevails in a majority of the States. Past Masters are members of the Grand Lodge in Wisconsin, South Carolina, and probably in some other States. In the District of Columbia they are members of the Grand Lodge, but the Past Masters of each Lodge have, in the aggregate, but one vote.

We do not maintain that the old rule, which had existed by ancient and immemorial usage, was so much a part of the body of Free Masonry that it could no where be lawfully changed. We do not hold that the present regulation on the subject, in this State, is on that account null and void. On the contrary, we believe that the subject is, in some degree, a matter of local regulation; and that the existing regulation in this State, being sanctioned by our present Constitution, is binding upon the Fraternity, till the more ancient and more republican rule shall again be restored.

While, therefore, the consideration of ancient usage should properly have some weight with the Lodges, in deciding the question which is before them, that question should, we think, be decided mainly by considerations connected with justice and expediency. Will the amendment proposed be an improvement, or the reverse?

It is a very important objection to the present regulation, (though perhaps less so than some others) that, in its practical operation, it gives to the Fraternity of one section of the State a disproportionate power in the Grand Lodge, which is wholly inconsistent with those principles of equality which lie at the foundation of our Order. The country Lodges send their representatives to the June communication; and, occasionally, a few Past Masters, who do not bear the appointment of a Representative, attend, at much personal inconvenience, from towns bordering on the river Hudson or elsewhere. But, under all ordinary circumstances, the privilege, to Past Masters, of voting in Grand Lodge, in its practical operation and effect, is confined, almost exclusively, to the city of New York. At the last June meeting of the Grand Lodge the Officers and Past Masters of St. John's Lodge, No. 1, in the city of New York, cast nineteen votes; Valley Lodge, of Rochester, by its representative, cast three votes. The Officers and Past Masters of Independent Royal Arch Lodge, No. 2, in the city of New York, cast twelve votes; Watertown Lodge, of Watertown, by its representative, cast three votes. St. John's Lodge and Independent Royal Arch Lodge are both highly respectable Lodges. We do not allude to them in any invidious tone or spirit, but only for the purpose of showing, by the simple statement of a fact, the practical working of the present system.

There are ninety-seven Lodges, in good standing, in the State—of which twenty-four are in the city of New York,—and the Officers and Past Masters of the twenty-four Lodges in New York are entitled to a greater number of votes in the Grand Lodge than the Representatives of the seventy-three Lodges in the rest of the State. We use the term "New York" in the sense it is used in our Masonic Constitution; embracing all Lodges within six miles of the City Hall of that city.

No comments, that we could make, would add any thing to the force of the above statement of facts.

But there are also other considerations which would lead us to regard the amendment as proper and expedient, even if all the members of the Fraternity, in the whole State, were residents of the city of New York. Even if all the Lodges of the State were located in that city, the right of voting which is extended to Past Masters would occasion great inequality of power in the Grand Lodge, as between different portions of the Fraternity. One Lodge would have twenty Past Masters to cast their votes; another Lodge only one, or two, or three. And this now actually happens among the Lodges of the city. It is not the country alone who are interested in the proposed amendment; it would operate alike for the benefit of our city brethren.

Again, while the present provision continues, it is a very natural desire, in each Lodge, that its Officers and Past Masters should wield as much power as possible in the Grand Lodge. Such power is increased by increasing the number of its Past Masters. Is there not danger, then, that considerations of this kind may, at some future time, if not now, affect the action of Lodges in the election of their own officers? Every Lodge in the city of New York, if it desires to retain, by re-election, as its Master, a valuable and experienced officer, whose services in that capacity it deems important to the Lodge, must, even now, do so at the sacrifice of the comparative aggregate power to be exercised by its Officers and Past Masters in the Grand Lodge. On the other hand, if a Lodge chooses to adopt a different policy and to change its Master every year, its Past Masters soon become numerous, and the votes of its Officers and Past Masters soon tell with powerful and controlling weight upon the action of the Grand Lodge.

But it is the circumstance that Past Masters are permanent and independent members of the Grand Lodge, which, in our estimation, forms one of the most important objections to the present system. We have seen that, in the old monarchical countries of Europe, our institution was essentially a republican institution. Its legislators were elected annually by the Lodges, and were the representatives of the Lodges; and the principles of equality and republicanism, which were inculcated and practiced in our order, took deep root in the public mind, and brought forth rich fruit for the public good. Is it not, then, passing strange, that, in this age of free principles, and in our own republican State of New York, we should now find so aristocratic a feature ingrafted and existing in our present Masonic Constitution? It is, in our minds, a strong reason for the amendment proposed, that it will bring our Grand Lodge nearer than it now is to that republican organization, which was the original organization of all the Grand Lodges throughout the world.

But, if we are to have a large body of permanent members for life of the Grand Lodge, whose votes may control its action and override the votes of the representatives of the Lodges and the

wishes of the Fraternity, it would seem manifestly proper that such permanent members should at least be selected by the Fraternity at large or by their Representatives. Whereas, in fact, each Past Master is selected by a single Lodge only, and derives his permanent power from the choice of a single Lodge. When the Master of a Lodge has passed the chair thereof, by a rule which is alike Masonic and republican, he returns in his Lodge to the level of his brethren, and can exercise *there* no power whatever by reason of the office that he has held. And yet, by a strange anomaly, from the mere fact that a single Lodge, perhaps a dozen men only, have thought fit to elect him their own Master for a single year, he becomes a member for life of the Grand Lodge, and, as such, a ruler for life over the whole Fraternity of the State.

Nor is the principle that the Grand Lodge should be composed of the representatives of Lodges, wholly lost sight of in our present Masonic Constitution. It provides that "the representatives of ten Lodges, convened on due notice, shall be indispensably necessary to open or transact business in the Grand Lodge." If all the Past Masters in the State were present with the Grand Officers they could not open a Grand Lodge. But yet, when the representatives of ten Lodges have assembled under the presiding Grand Officer, and a Grand Lodge has been formed, thirty-five Past Masters coming in may nullify the unanimous will of these representatives of the Lodges. So, too, if twenty or fifty Lodges are present and represented, a sufficient number of Past Masters coming in may nullify the unanimous will of the representatives of the Lodges. They may adopt measures which the representatives of the Lodges unanimously vote against as injurious to the Fraternity; and they may defeat measures which the representatives of the Lodges unanimously believe to be required for the general good. In like manner, a large number of Past Masters, uniting with a small minority of the representatives of the Lodges, may control the action of the Grand Lodge and defeat the will of a majority of the representatives of the Lodges and of the Fraternity.

We have distinctly stated as one reason, in our minds, for the amendment proposed, that it will tend to do away, in some degree, with that unequal power in the Grand Lodge which is now possessed by the city of New York. But we are not, in this, influenced by any unfriendly feeling towards the Free Masons of that city. We entertain no such feeling. On the contrary, we do full justice to the many pure minded and noble hearted Free Masons who reside in New York; some of whom justly enjoy a reputation which is not confined to our own State or country; and we extend to the whole brotherhood of that city the same fraternal regard which is extended by us to the Fraternity of the other portions of the State. We desire that the whole Fraternity of the State should, in every sense, be one Fraternity; and that all distinction of feeling, if any exist, between city and country,

should be wholly done away. It is for this very reason that we desire the change proposed; for true fraternal regard can only rest, for its lasting basis, upon equality of privileges and equality of rights.

We address, then, not the Free Masons of one section but all the Free Masons of the State; the Free Masons of New York, not less than the Free Masons of Erie, or St. Lawrence or Steuben. We appeal, with confidence, to the Masonic principles and sense of justice of our New York brethren. Let them remember that, after the proposed amendment is adopted, (if it shall be adopted,) their privileges will still, in all things, be equal, and, in some respects, superior to their brethren of the country. From each city Lodge there will usually be four votes in Grand Lodge; from each country Lodge usually but three. By the Constitution and by the compact also, the important privilege is conceded that the meetings of the Grand Lodge are to be held in the city of New York. At the three quarterly communications, therefore, the whole Masonic power is exercised, in point of fact, by the city of New York alone; and at the annual communication, in June, the representatives of the city Lodges can attend the Grand Lodge meetings with but little inconvenience, while the representatives of the country Lodges can only be present at much personal sacrifice—leaving for that purpose their business, their families, and their homes. With the “compact,” whatever may be its provisions, we have no wish to interfere. Again, by the Constitution and compact, the discretion of the Grand Lodge in the election of Grand Officers is curtailed, and one half of the six highest Officers must, under all circumstances, be chosen from the city of New York; a privilege, we believe, which is not conceded to any city or town by the Constitution of any other Grand Lodge of our country. By the Constitution and compact, the only salaried officers of high grade *must* be chosen from the city of New York; and, in point of fact, *all* the salaried officers are uniformly chosen from that city. Again, by the Constitution, the twelve Grand Stewards of Charity must all be chosen from New York; and the high authority and powers of the Grand Stewards’ Lodge, that important appendage of the Grand Lodge, are exercised wholly by the city of New York.

We allude to these facts for the purpose of showing to our city brethren, that, by granting the proposed amendment to the Fraternity of the whole State, they will not concede too much. They can well afford the concession (if it be a concession) to the spirit of justice and of harmony.

Formerly members of the Lodges in the city of New York paid double the amount of annual dues to the Grand Lodge which was paid by members of country Lodges. That distinction was long since done away. The change was moved in Grand Lodge by a representative from the country; it received the unanimous vote of the country representatives, and was in accordance with the universal wish of the whole fraternity of the country. The

Free Masons of the state at large have thus shown their sincere desire to do away with any invidious distinction which might exist to the prejudice of their city brethren.

There are several reasons which have influenced our minds in favor of the proposed amendment to which we have not alluded; but this Circular has already extended beyond the limits which we prescribed for it. In our opinion the proposed amendment ought to be adopted, and we respectfully recommend to the Lodges that they give to it their affirmative vote.

It may doubtless be liable to objection and criticism; for what amendment is not? Some may think that it goes too far, and others that it does not go far enough. But it should be borne in mind that the true question to be decided is, not whether the proposed amendment will make the Constitution perfect in the point to which it relates, but whether, on the whole, it will be an improvement; whether its adoption will make the Constitution better than it now is or worse. Each Lodge, we trust, will give to this question a careful consideration, and then act as its own sense of duty shall direct.

This Circular will be sent to every Master of a Lodge in the state, to be laid before his Lodge; and, to guard against possible miscarriage by mail, a copy will also be sent to every Secretary of a Lodge, when known.

OCTOBER, A. L., 5848.

H. L. PALMER,

Master of Evening Star Lodge, No. 75, W. Troy.

SALEM TOWN,

Past Master, Scipio Lodge, No. 110, Aurora.

WILLIAM HOLMES,

Master of St. Paul's Lodge, No. 124, Auburn.

J. M. HATCH,

S. Warden of Utica Lodge, No. 47, Utica.

H. JUDSON,

Master of Syracuse Lodge, No. 102, Syracuse.

J. C. STRONG,

P. Master Seneca Lodge, No. 113, Waterloo.

JOHN L. LEWIS,

of Milo Lodge, No. 108 Penn Yan.

WILLIAM WADE,

P. Master, Sylvan Lodge, No. 41, Moravia.

AUGUSTUS WILLARD,

Master of Eastern Light Lodge, No. 126, Greene.

L. H. BROWN,

Master of Watertown Lodge, No. 49, Watertown.

P. F. PARSONS,

Master of Oswego Lodge, No. 127, Oswego.

ENOS BARNES,

Past Master, Ark Lodge, No. 33, Geneva.

WILLIAM BREWSTER,

P. Master, Valley Lodge, No. 109, Rochester.

GEO. W. CLINTON,

J. Warden of Hiram Lodge, No. 105, Buffalo.

ASHER TORRENCE,

P. Master, Lockport Lodge, No. 73, Lockport.

WM. SEYMOUR,

Master of Masters Lodge, No. 5, Albany.

A. J. ROUSSEAU,

Master of King Solomon's Primitive Lodge, No. 91, Troy.

I. ROGERS,

Master of Hudson Lodge, No. 7, Hudson.

CHARLES E. SHEPARD,

P. Master, Scipio Lodge, No. 110, Aurora.

D. S. WRIGHT,

P. Master, Phoenix Lodge, No. 96, Whitehall.

DARIUS CLARK,

Master of St. Lawrence Lodge, No. 111, Canton.

A. MEEKER,

P. Master, Franklin Lodge, No. 90, Ballston.

APPENDIX.

PROCEEDINGS OF PHOENIX LODGE, NO. 58, LANSINGBURGH.

At a meeting of Phoenix Lodge, No. 58, held at their Hall in the village of Lansingburgh, on the thirtieth day of November, A. L., 5848, W. Br. JAMES M. AUSTIN, offered the following Resolutions, which were unanimously adopted, ordered to be printed, and a copy sent to the different Lodges throughout the State.

Resolved, That the power exercised, in this state, by Past Masters in the Grand Lodge, is a great and growing evil; and while it is in conflict with the ANCIENT USAGE of the Fraternity, it is also, in its practical working here, unequal and unjust, and inconsistent with those principles of equality, which lie at the foundation of our order.

Resolved, That we approve of the proposed amendments to the Masonic constitution of the Fraternity of this state, which received the affirmative vote of the Grand Lodge at the last annual communication.

Resolved, That while the Fraternity of this state are bound to adhere to the ancient landmarks, they have an unquestionable right to amend their own Masonic Constitution as to all matters of local regulation; a right which they cannot surrender with safety to themselves, or with justice to their successors.

Resolved, That the strange claim which has been set up, that Past Masters have a "vested" and "inalienable" right to be voting members of the Grand Lodge forever, and of consequence, to be rulers for life over the whole Fraternity of the state, is unfounded and unmasonic; that it is dangerous for the present, and perilous for the future; that it is degrading to the Fraternity at large; and is derogatory to the rights which belong to the mass of the Fraternity, as free men and Free Masons.

Resolved, That however important, previously, may have been the question as to the constitutional amendments above referred to, the assertion of this claim of "vested" and "inalienable" right in Past Masters, has given to the question a ten-fold importance; and in our opinion, the Lodges are now imperatively re-

quired to adopt those amendments, if they desire to maintain their own just rights, or to preserve the cherished principles of our order.

Resolved, That each member of the Fraternity, be respectfully requested to read the "Compact," (as it is termed,) which will be found at the eleventh page of the Masonic constitution; by which he will see for himself, how entirely without the shadow of foundation is the pretence, that the proposed amendments are contrary to that "compact." The only mention of Past Masters in the compact, is in this part of a sentence, viz: "That the number of Lodges which one Master or Past Master may represent, shall not exceed three; that Past Masters shall not be represented by proxy." When the proposed amendments to the constitution shall become a part of the constitutional law, the provision as to the number of Lodges which one Master or Past Master may represent will still remain precisely as it now is; nor do those amendments authorize Past Masters to be represented by proxy.

Resolved, That we tender comfort and consolation to the Past Masters of Abrams Lodge, No. 20, assuring them, that the amendments when adopted, will not prevent their holding offices in the Grand Lodge, IF ELECTED.

A true copy from the minutes.

B. G. HATHAWAY, *Secretary*.

The Committee appointed at Geneva have sent out a brief "Memorandum," containing various suggestions. If any Lodge has not received it with the accompanying blank certificates &c., it can obtain them, if desired, by application to Dr. Enos Barnes, Geneva, Ontario County, or to H. L. Palmer, Esq., West Troy, Albany County. All the Lodges, which as yet have acted on and adopted the amendments, have used the same form of vote (reciting the amendments at length in the preamble to the resolution) and the same form of certificate. The following is an extract from the Memorandum:

"1 The provision as to amendments of the constitution will be found in the 106th Article of the Constitution, page 51. It provides as follows, viz:

"No Amendment to this constitution shall be made, or have any effect, until the same shall have had the affirmative vote of the Grand Lodge at two successive June Communications, *unless in addition to the affirmative vote of the Grand Lodge, at one June Communication, it shall have received the affirmative vote of a majority of the Lodges within this jurisdiction.*"

The proceedings of the Grand Lodge, in June, as to the proposed amendments, will be found on the 51st and 52d pages of the Grand Lodge proceedings which have lately been published.

It is considered most proper and every way most desirable, that the further action to be had on the amendments be by a direct vote of the Lodges on the amendments themselves.

2. Caution should be used that all the proceedings of each Lodge, in relation to the amendments, be strictly regular; and uniformity among the Lodges, as to the form of proceedings, is desirable, so far as may be convenient."